The Fourth Church Pulpit

LIFE'S SECOND QUESTION

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Exodus 33:1-6, Matthew 19:16-26

". . .What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Matthew 9:16 (NRSV)

Last May 16 the congregation of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, at a special meeting, unanimously approved a proposal brought by the Session to restore the sanctuary and to renovate and recreate the rest of its program and administrative facilities, and to launch a capital funds campaign to raise the money required to accomplish these objectives.

Two weeks ago the officers of the congregation approved the plan and called a special meeting of the congregation today in order to share the excitement with you.

This is an important day in the life of this church. If you are not a member but a visitor from out-of-town, we'd like to share our excitement with you as well. We hope you will remain for the congregational meeting, which will begin promptly at noon as part of the service and adjourn no later than 12:45 p.m.

The meeting itself is intended to be a part of this worship service — because the plans are so reflective of our faith in God, our commitment to the kingdom of God, and our deep love for this church.

The plan includes a resolution to our accessibility and internal traffic problems.

It includes two full elevators, ramps, comfortable facilities.

And a gathering space for our community of faith: for eating together, for a variety of community activities including our coffee hour, theatre type presentations, lectures and meals for up to four hundred people - immediately adjacent to the sanctuary.

And it accomplishes that by recreating the Blair Chapel in Westminster House, in a logical and convenient and aesthetically pleasing sequence of worship spaces along Delaware Place.

The plan includes recreation space for older adults, adult education, classrooms, nursery care, children's education, the Tutoring Program and a full day care facility for forty-three youngsters.

It includes a wonderful new entrance from Chestnut Street, spacious, light, accessible; and a ramped access to the heart of the building from Michigan Avenue through a covered cloister to be constructed just south of the building in the Garth. In this sanctuary it includes a newly refurbished ceiling, repaired and restored paintings and sculpture, cleaned walls, floors, restored pews, new lights, and a revoiced and enhanced pipe organ.

The plan will cost more money than this congregation has ever had to spend or raise — $12 million, although it is probably no more in value today than the congregation raised when it built the facility in 1912-14 for $740,000.

And the plan includes a one-million dollar contribution for the mission of Jesus Christ in the world through the Presbyterian Church.

This is important. It is about the faith and hope of the members and friends of Fourth Presbyterian Church in the year of our Lord 1993. It is about our priorities and our possessions and our responsibility. It is about our love for this institution and our hope for its future.

It is, ultimately, about our commitment to Jesus Christ and our belonging to his people. And it is about that — whether you are a member of this church, a friend, an occasional visitor, a first-time guest — that I wish to speak this morning.

The great philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that there are three questions in life:

> "What can we know?
>
> What must we do?
>
> What can we hope for?"

This is a sermon about the second question. What must we do?

I'm not sure he had Immanuel Kant in mind, but one of the very distinguished Biblical scholars and teachers of our time, Walter Wink, put it ever more powerfully. Wink says:

> "The fundamental question for the first half of our pilgrimage is 'What is the meaning of my life?' The question for the second half is, 'With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?'"

Life's second question —

> "What must we do?
>
> "With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?"

Sometimes life puts that question to us urgently. Arthur Ashe, who died last February, was a world champion tennis player, captain of America's Davis Cup Team, who in the course of heart surgery, contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. As he was dying he wrote a wonderful book, *Days of Grace.*

After his first by-pass surgery and the decision to retire from playing tennis in 1979, Ashe experienced a sense of uneasiness, restlessness. He reflects:

> "How could I be dissatisfied, even subtly, with my life to that point? I had lived a fantasy of a life. But I was dissatisfied. Who knows what force gnaws at us, telling us that our accomplishments, no matter how sensational, are not enough, that we need to do more?" [p. 39]
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> "I wanted to make a difference, however small in the world." [p. 43]

Life's second question. Immanuel Kant, speaking out of the dim past, and Walter Wink from a modern classroom, and Arthur Ashe, in the middle of an unplanned, unexpected collision with his own mortality: don't they all sound like that young man who one day came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He'd obviously been thinking about it a lot, too.

This is a very attractive young person. When Mark tells his version of the story he adds a lovely little vignette. Jesus looked at this young man and loved him. He was so earnest, so sincere, so hard working, so purposeful, so successful. He sounds like he'd be right at home in the Loop Group, as a Fourth Church usher, or cooking for the homeless.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Life's second big question. His theology is not very reformed. We sons and daughters of John Calvin know that you can't do anything to inherit eternal life. All you can do is receive your inheritance. Nevertheless we understand what he means. There's something gnawing at this young person, and who doesn't know what it feels like? She's got it all: great job, good friends, lots of travel, promising future and a growing portfolio with her broker . . . but there is this gnawing disease . . . this middle of the night dissatisfaction. What more must I do?

Jesus doesn't condemn or criticize the young man. He appreciates him. When he tells the young man to follow the religious rules, to keep on keeping on, and the young man assures him that he's already doing all that, Jesus prescribes: tells him something further to do . . . and it's stunning.

"Sell your possessions — give the money to the poor. Come — follow me."

One scholar, commenting on the text, said that if you aren't appalled by this message, you have not yet heard it.

The young man, Matthew explains, went away grieving because he has many possessions. He was appalled. I can understand that. I'm appalled too. Who isn't? Sell everything? Give it all away?

And then Jesus tells a little story about a camel that obviously can't squeeze through the eye of a needle and observes that it would actually be easier for a wealthy person to get into the kingdom. And I don't know about you, but that doesn't make me feel any better about my prospects or yours.

I think one of the most charming and reassuring discoveries in New Testament scholarship is the unusual abundance of erasures, and additions and deletions and changes in this paragraph in the most ancient manuscripts. Christians have been trying to change this story for a thousand years.

My favorite, and the most popular effort comes from the Ninth Century. It seems that a scribe decided that there must have been a small opening in city walls, called the Eye of the Needle, by which late arrivals, after the gates were closed for the night, could gain admittance. The idea was that the camel would have to get down on its knees and be relieved of its burden of goods in order to get in. It's too bad there's nothing to that. Think of what a great stewardship sermon that could become in the hands of a good preacher. Heavily loaded Christians, needing to downsize, unload some of their goods — as in a pledge to the church — in order to squeeze into the kingdom.

A stewardship chairperson in a former church — who is a good friend — used to say: "John, if you could just find a way to say 'double your pledges and I'll get you into heaven,' I'll bet we'd make our budget."

But you can't say that. It's not what he meant. Jesus was using hyperbole. It is impossible for a camel to squeeze itself through the eye of a needle. It's impossible to buy your way into the kingdom. It's impossible to buy meaningful life.

And that's the point. That's the sad point of this whole incident. The young man couldn't do what he needed to do. He thought he couldn't sell everything because he had a lot, and he loved what he had. So he went away, sad, grieving, resigned.

You and I live in a culture that promises us, and our children, that you can buy life. You can establish happiness and security if you earn enough, have enough, accumulate enough. We live in a "consumer culture."

Sometimes it produces amusing if not inane behavior. An article in *The New Republic* identified the newest perk for America's ruling class as something called "No Hassle" and illustrated. Elizabeth Taylor has never been in a bank; George Bush was astonished by a supermarket check-out counter; when Mia and Woody used to stroll along Fifth Avenue, their Rolls followed a few yards behind in case they got tired; and Timothy Leary, recently separated, uses a new service available in Boston called Dial-A-Wife which, for $20 per hour, provides someone to cook, shop, pick him up at the airport, plan parties and balance his checkbook.

The trouble is consumer culture doesn't deliver on its promises to provide happiness, and in fact, works to the detriment of institutions which can — family, schools, non-profit public organizations and churches, mosques, synagogues. Cornell West whose fine new book, *Race Matters,* looks evenly and intelligently at the malaise of racism, poverty, unemployment and escalating violence in which we find ourselves, and in a recent interview said that when a market economy — which we now know is in some way necessary — becomes a market culture — mediating institutions that hold us together start to deteriorate. And why not? Why wouldn't family, school and church deteriorate if the philosophic, spiritual drive behind the culture is greed, selfishness, narcissism?

Jesus did not condemn this young man. He had a wonderful opportunity to launch a diatribe against success and its rewards but he didn't. He did not condemn his wealth. In fact, he apparently had other friends of means: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea. He loved this young man.

What's wrong with him? Well, he's not free, for starters. He was already in bondage. His inability to sell all means that what he had — owned him. I'll bet he was too busy to enjoy life. I'll bet he worked so hard to get ahead, he couldn't remember what "ahead" meant. I'll bet the task of securing what he had, scurrying to keep up with inflation, was so important that he had no time, no love, no passion in life.

I think that's why he came to Jesus. He was engaged in a struggle for his own soul. And for him the prescription was surgical: let it go — give it away — and come follow me.

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The most reassuring part of the text is that the disciples themselves were amazed and asked, "Then who can be saved?" They weren't wealthy obviously. They had given up about as much as it is possible to give and yet they knew that they still loved what they had.

Arthur Ashe wrote,

> "I'm glad I have enough money to live comfortably. I decided long ago that, on the whole, I much prefer having money to not having it. On the other hand, I also learned a long time ago what money can and cannot do for me. From what we get we make a living. What we give, however, makes a life." [p. 176]

The young man's salvation was in God's hands. But his life, his future, was his ability to give — to open his hands and let go of his possessions — to answer life's second question about making a difference by giving — a cause, a hope, a Lord. The young man's tragedy was that confronted by Jesus Christ, he could not, would not respond.

I found Arthur Ashe's memoir touching because he experienced and wrote about, in a compressed period of months, the human condition. Most of us, thank God, don't have that necessity. And yet, we are not here forever. We have only so many chances to make a difference.

When Arthur Ashe made public announcement of his condition, he became angry, depressed; and then, after three weeks his anger began to subside and the idea of AIDS and what it meant about the future began to integrate.

He wrote:

> "You come to the realization that time is short. These are extraordinary conditions. You have to step up. How much time I had left, I did not know. However, I could not ignore the fact that AIDS, as well as heart disease, was exacting a heavy toll on my body. I had no time to waste."

So he began to speak out on the topic of AIDS: how you get it, how to keep from getting it — and how urgent it is for all of us to understand the terrifying prospect of this epidemic continuing unabated and indirectly aided by the attitude of much of the religious community which finds itself opposed to the use of the most effective means of prevention.

He opened his heart and his resources and established a Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS, and an association for African American Athletes, and an Institute for Urban Health at the State University of New York, and a chair in Pediatric AIDS Research at St. Jude's Hospital, Memphis; he became more vocal and active politically, protesting U.S. policy on Haitian refugees and getting arrested at the White House.

And he wrote:

> "As I settled into this new stage of my life I became increasingly conscious of . . . an exhilaration. I felt pain, but also something like pleasure in responding purposefully, vigorously. I had lost many matches on the tennis court, but I had seldom quit. I was losing, but playing well now: my head was down, my eyes riveted on the ball, I had to be careful but I could not be tentative." [p. 251]

And it seemed to me, reading this graceful book and thinking about what it means to be alive and well, with an opportunity to make a difference, it seemed to me that Arthur Ashe had in fact, discovered his answer to life's second question and that you and I might pay careful attention.

At the end of the book, not very long before he died, he wrote,

Space for new Conclusion

> "I am a fortunate man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems." [p. 292]

We are daring to ask a lot of one another in this enterprise we have undertaken. We are asking one another to give money — more money than we have ever given to the church — more perhaps than many of us have ever given to anything.

We are daring to ask a lot of one another, because this institution is so very precious and because it does make a difference in the life of the city and in the lives of thousands of men and women and children. We are daring to ask a lot of one another because we want this church to be strong for the future and for future generations of men and women and children.

But there really is more to it than that. This is much, much more than a capital funds drive and a building project.

This has to do with you and me and our faith, our hope, our dreams, our love, our aspiration, our commitment to walk faithfully with the company of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Reading about Arthur Ashe and thinking about this time in the life of the church I love, and this time in my life, I conclude that this is a chance to make a difference I don't want to miss. I want to be part of this.

Your salvation and mine, is in the hands of a faithful savior. Your ultimate destiny is in the gracious hands of a loving God.

Your life . . . your capacity to make a difference, to love and work and care . . . to participate in and to empower, and to support institutions that bring healing and hope to others — your fulfillment and purpose and even your happiness, all of that is in your hands.

Life's second question . . . What must I do?

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Eternal God, we would be faithful. Help us; strengthen and encourage us, and assure that as we open our hands and give, we do your will, your work, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.